

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Much of Oklahoma got some rain over the weekend with amounts ranging from less than one quarter inch to about an inch. The rain was very timely and much appreciated but will not be enough to produce much wheat pasture or rebuild soil moisture. It does, however, buy some time for wheat to hang on until more moisture can perhaps arrive. It is unlikely that this rain produced any runoff to replenish livestock ponds and stock water will continue to be one of the most critical factors for many producers.

Feeder cattle auction totals the past four weeks are about 7 percent below the same period last year. However, last year by late October and November, feeder runs were less than usual for the period because so many calves had been marketed in September and early October. The auction total for the last four weeks is down 16 percent from a more typical run in 2010. In the month of September, 2012, auction totals were down about 11 percent from 2010, compared to last year when the September total was up 22 percent from 2010. The bottom line is that the fall feeder run is rather typical in terms of timing but is down simply because there are fewer calves. Remember that Oklahoma beef cows decreased nearly 15 percent in 2011 and few, if any, were replaced in 2012.

Cull cow and bull sales are also down sharply this fall. Though volumes are following a typical seasonal peak, cull cow sales the last four weeks are down 45 percent from the 2011 drought elevated total and down 33 percent from the more typical 2010 level. Cull cow sales are down proportionately more than the decrease in cow numbers. The decrease in cull cow sales this fall suggests that producers, having culled deeply last year, are trying to hang onto remaining cows and cull less than normal this year. That may be increasingly difficult to do with limited water and forage availability this winter.

Prices for stocker calves have dropped slightly the last two weeks as wheat pasture demand fizzled, but heavy feeder prices have held pretty steady. A sharp break continues between steers less than 575 pounds and those heavier. Last week's prices suggest that the value of steer gain from 422 pounds to 574 pounds is \$0.59/pound, given a \$32.88/cwt price decrease over the 152 pound weight range. In contrast, a \$6.41/cwt price drop for steers from 625 to 875 pounds makes the value of gain \$1.26/pound over the 250 pound weight range. The market still favors heavy steers for total gains up to 250 pounds. Cull cow prices have held mostly steady the last month and are currently \$73-\$78/cwt, \$8-10/cwt higher than this time last year.

Nitrate Toxicity and the First Winter Snow Storm

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Almost as predictable as the coming of the winter season will be the quickly spread horror story of the death of several cows from a herd that was fed "the good hay" for the first time after the snow storm. Ranchers that have harvested and stored potentially high nitrate forages such as forage sorghums, millets, sudangrass hybrids, and/or johnsongrass, need to be aware of the increased possibility of nitrate toxicity. Of particular concern, is the scenario whereby the cows are fed this hay for the first time after a severe winter storm. Cattle can adapt (*to a limited extent*) to nitrate intake over time. However, cattlemen often will feed the higher quality forage sorghum type hays for the first time during a stressful cold wet winter storm. Cows may be especially hungry, because they have not gone out in the pasture grazing during the storm. They may be stressed and slightly weakened by the cold, wet conditions. This combination of events makes them even more vulnerable to nitrate toxicity.

The rancher is correct in trying to make available a higher quality forage during severe winter weather in an effort to lessen the loss of body weight and body condition due to the effect of the wind chill. But if the forage he provides to the cows is potentially toxic, his best intentions can backfire.

The best approach would be to know ahead of time what is the concentration of nitrate in the hay. Have representative sample of the hay tested by a reliable laboratory. If the producer is confident that the hay is very low in nitrate content then use of the hay should be safe. If the nitrate content is unknown, then precautions should be taken. Feeding small amounts of the hay along with other grass hays during the fall and early winter days can help to "adapt" the cattle to the potential of nitrate. This is not a sure-fire, 100% safe concept. If the hay is quite high in nitrate, it can still be quite dangerous. Diluting the high nitrate feed with other feeds can reduce (not eliminate) the likelihood of problems.

If the rancher has no choice but to feed, unknown sorghum-type hays during a snow storm, he or she should plan to watch the cattle carefully for 8 to 12 hours after feeding to be ready to remove the cattle from access to the high-nitrate forage, if symptoms of nitrate toxicity appear. Nitrate toxicity causes the blood to lose its oxygen-carrying capability. Watch for cattle that are panting, staggering, disoriented, or other signs of asphyxiation.

Special Thanks:

Thank you to all of the cattle producers (and others) who have served, or are currently serving in the United States Armed Forces. We salute you during the Veterans' Day observances. We appreciate your sacrifice for our country.

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